THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Simplicity of God

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Ask not, doubt not. You have, my heart, already chosen the joy of Advent. As a force against your own uncertainty, bravely tell yourself "it is the Advent of the great God." Say this with faith and love and then both the past of your life, which has become holy, and your life's eternal boundless future will draw together in the now of this world. For then into the heart comes the one who is advent, the boundless future who is already in the process of coming, who has already come into the time of the flesh to redeem it.

Karl Rahner
The Eternal Year

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THE SIMPLICITY OF GOD

Luke 2:1-7

It's a complicated ordeal, this business of celebrating Christmas.

Last Wednesday I began my day with an early morning breakfast followed by several meetings, and in each case we began the proceedings, as soon as the initial good mornings had been exchanged, with what I've come to recognize as the annual "Christmas Lament," lengthy, heart-felt complaints on the subject of how busy we all were, and how ill-prepared for Christmas, and how many responsibilities we had yet to fulfill, and social engagements to attend, and how stressful it all has become. There's the commercialism and creeping exhaustion which catches up with us this week. The meeting disintegrated into a full-blown game of what is called in the trade, "Ain't it awful," or, "I'm worse off than you are." It went something like this.

Round One

"I'm so far behind – I only have half my shopping done."
"That's nothing, I haven't even bought a thing yet."

Round Two

"We put a few cards in the mail last night, but the list keeps growing, you know."
"That's nothing. I haven't started addressing cards."
"I haven't even bought mine yet."
"I'm not sending them this year. It's stupid."

For gifts and cards you can substitute parties you have to attend and don't want to, relatives you have to entertain and don't want to, trips you have to take – the possibilities are almost unlimited!

We do make it complicated, don't we? Tom Tewell, pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan tells the story of a little girl who was carried away with the excitement of Christmas and was hyperactive and underfoot and in the way and borderline obnoxious all day long. Her parents were stressed out because they had put off their shopping till the last minute and they were at each others' throats and the little girl and her brother and sister picked it up and were having a good old fashioned Christmas fight with threats of death and destruction and vows of eternal hatred. Everybody was cranky and irritable and finally, the parents had had it. In desperation, they ordered the children to bed.

A few minutes later the little girl emerged from her bedroom and said,
"Aren't we even going to say our prayers?"

"All right. All right – we'll say prayers. Get back in bed."

And they gathered around and said their prayers, ending, as this family did, with the Lord's Prayer. And on this occasion, when they got to "forgive us our trespasses" her parents heard her say, "And forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us."

Tom Tewell says there's a sermon in there somewhere and there certainly is. In fact, this is it.

Poet and good friend Ann Weems captures the sense of it in her book of poems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem,* in "This Year Will Be Different."

> Who among us does not have dreams
> that this year will be different?
> Who among us does not intend to go
> peacefully, leisurely, carefully toward
> Bethlehem,
> for who among us likes to cope with the
> commercialism of Christmas
> which lures us to tinsel not only the tree
> but also our hearts?
> Who among us intends to get caught up in
> tearing around and wearing down....
>
> Who among us does not yearn for
> time for our hearts to ponder the Word of God...
> This year we intend to follow the Star
> instead of the crowd."

In dramatic contrast to the stress and the complexity of our celebration of Jesus' birth, the story itself is elegantly and wonderfully simple. The words of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, someone has suggested, are among the most familiar words in human language. People who don't know another thing about Christianity know "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth – to Bethlehem."

Familiar, beloved words. But also brilliant literature. Note the drama and tension in the characters. Caesar Augustus – that's the title the Roman senate bestowed on the Emperor Octavian, "the august one." He was one of the best: noble, courageous, with high aspirations for justice and peace. He is the greatest man on earth, maybe the greatest man in human history to that date. And Joseph, a Jewish carpenter from a nondescript town on the far edge of Octavian's empire, and his very pregnant and very poor young fiancée, Mary. Familiarity has dulled the impact, but that is a ludicrous, brilliant contrast.

The theme of Luke's dramatic contrast is simplicity. Caesar Augustus will be remembered in history primarily because of the coincidence of his imperial reign with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. And Quirinius – who ever heard of him? Who would know about Quirinius, except for the fact that a handful of his simple shepherd subjects saw a light and heard voices and left their sheep on the hillside and ran to Bethlehem to see a newborn child?

We make the matter terribly complicated, but the story itself is elegantly simple.

I have always been intrigued by the idea of the simplicity of God. Perhaps it is because we Reformed Presbyterians have invested so much energy historically in the hard work of theology: studying, writing, debating, arguing. Our tradition has lived deeply in libraries and universities as well as churches. We have produced theology and theologians and in the process we have made religion pretty complicated. But among the more intriguing things a theologian ever said, I think, was that God is simple.

The theologian who first said it was Thomas Aquinas, the great doctor of medieval Christianity, a magnificent intellectual, an Aristotelian philosopher who built an elaborate theological system which has been compared to the architecture of a cathedral, and which is still studied and admired. Aquinas set out to prove the existence of God.

Aquinas taught that the place to begin to think about God is with God's simplicity. And with the realization which comes in the middle of theological struggle that what we can know of God will not be produced by our individual systems but by God, showing us, revealing God to us.

When God comes, it is, in fact, in elegant simplicity – not in the Imperial Palace in Rome or the Governor's Palace in Jerusalem, but in a Bethlehem stable, not in a wonderfully eloquent theological system, but in the birth of a child.

At the heart of our lamentations about the stress and business of the season is a real longing for simplicity.

In a conversation with my brother during which we exchanged our own Christmas laments about how busy we were, he told me about a workshop put on by the Mental Health Department of the county where he is the manager for other senior managers. "Planning for a Good Holiday." It was a four-step process:

- Setting your goals: what do I want the holiday season to be like?
- Actions: what do I need to make these goals happen?
- Obstacles: what do I need to stop worrying about?
- Cures: the simple things usually matter the most.

What caught my brother's imagination, however, was the workshop leader's suggestion that each of the busy management types listening adopt a three or four word "mantra" to repeat when things start to spin out of control. Some of the suggestions were, "I have nothing to prove," "this is supposed to be fun." Bill said his mantra is "Jesus is coming." It's not actually a bad idea. I adopted one and I'll pass it along at the end of this sermon.

One thing I know for sure, is that the most basic human needs are simple, and so is the pain when the need is denied or unmet. Michigan poet and author Thomas Lynch, in his delightful little book *The Undertaking*, tells about a friend of his, recently divorced, who threw himself into a frenzied sequence of passionate and energetic love affairs, "the stuff memories are made of." But after a

year or so of such encounters, Lynch poignantly observes, "Henry Nugent was hungry for love: that unencumbered approval by another of your species for your presence in their lives." [p. 70]

It is our simplest, most basic need, no matter who we are, regardless of our age, our status or station in life, the size of our portfolio or retirement plan, the length of our resume – the simple need to know that we matter, that our being here counts for something, that we have value: that is to say, that we are loved. The CEO needs that; the homemaker, the cop on the corner and the homeless woman, the young urban highly successful adult and the kid from Cabrini.

Kathleen Norris, best-selling author, teaches creative writing to elementary school children in North Dakota. One day she asked the children to write about anything in the world they cared about in whatever way they wanted, without worrying about spelling or punctuation or staying between the lines and margins. A little boy who almost never participated in class discussions stunned her by handing her a piece of paper on which he had written,

> My Very First Dad
>
> I remember him / like God in my heart
> I remember him in my heart / like clouds overhead
> And strawberry ice cream and bananas / when I was a little kid
> But the most I remember / is his love / as big as Texas when I was born.

The equally stunned teacher told Kathleen that the little boy had been born in Texas, and had never known his father who skipped town the day he was born.

Norris pondered, "Who would have guessed that an ordinary boy, in an ordinary classroom in North Dakota, was walking around with a love, a loss, as big as Texas in his heart?" [*Cloister Walk*, "Exile Homeland and Negative Capability," p. 53-57]

We make this business complicated. We load up the holiday season with activity that borders on frenzy. We place more demands on ourselves and on others than at any other time of year. We hope and yearn and sometimes demand that this season produce joy, happiness and peace. And the essence of it all is that God comes simply into the world and into your life and mine, not so much in response to the frenzied complexity of the celebration, but in simple love to respond to our basic needs.

God comes precisely to address your need to know that you matter.

God's love is born in your heart precisely where you need to know that you are accepted and wanted and loved by the one who gave you breath and life.

God's love is born where your loss is simplest and deepest and most profound, "a love or loss the size of Texas in your heart." If you have lost someone, if there will be an empty chair in the family circle this year, you will feel that pain more deeply, but you will also be touched by the healing grace of God's love in the birth of the child.

God's love is born where you are vulnerable: in your personal fears and anxieties about your prospects, your job, your health.

We make it complicated, but the heart of it is the same – the miracle of God's love born into history in Bethlehem and born again into your life and mine where our needs are simple and basic and real.

Ann Weems asked, for all of us, in her poem, "Who among us does not have dreams that this year will be different?"

> "This year, when we find ourselves off the path again – let's not add another stress to our Advent days – that of trying to do Christmas correctly!
> Instead, let's approach the birth of our Lord with joyful abandon;
> let's do what the shepherds did and praise and glorify God
> for all we've seen and heard!
> This year will be different."

A simple "mantra" repeated quietly to myself helps, I find. The one I adopted and will repeat over the next few days is simple – "Give My Heart." I commend it to you....

> What can I give him,
> Poor as I am
> If I were a shepherd
> I would bring a lamb
> If I were a wise man
> I would do my part
> Yet, what I can I give him
> Give my heart.
>
> Amen.